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AUTHOR O'Rourke, James S., IV
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues the importance of preparing business managers for a global marketplace and addresses who is responsible for the training and how to go about it. The establishment of an MBA (Master of Business Administration)-level course in intercultural communication is examined. Areas discussed involve determining what the goals of the course should be, selecting textbooks and readings, selecting guest speakers, selecting films and videotapes, and involving students in the learning process. In addition, thoughts concerning the evaluation of student achievement are offered in light of the course's lack of performance-based examinations. It is noted that communication-based preparation for the workplace and so-called soft-skills training in both undergraduate and MBA degree programs is being increasingly valued, and that the value of this type of intercultural communication course lies in better preparing students to face the realities of the world they will enter after graduation. An appendix provides an annotated list of five selected films and videotapes. Contains 15 references. (GLR)

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TEACHING INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION:

A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

to Seeing the World

Through the Eyes of Others

An Invited Presentation To

THE ELEVENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON

LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION

FOR WORLD BUSINESS AND THE PROFESSIONS

Eastern Michigan University

Ypsilanti, Michigan

March 26-28, 1992

JAMES S. O'ROURKE, IV, Ph.D.

College of Business Administration

University of Notre Dame

Notre Dame, Indiana

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"The term 'international business' no longer has any real meaning," according to author Blake Park. "Distinguishing between domestic business and international business is rapidly becoming nothing more than a semantic sleight of hand." In Park's view, "individual success in the international marketplace requires more than a basic understanding of economic, regulatory and managerial practices. It also requires an intensive study of the political, social and cultural trends that influence a country's business" (Park 23).

In short, it involves developing what Bill Kirst, Managing Partner of Price Waterhouse's practice in Poland, terms "bi-culturalism." "It's not learning a particular language that is important," he asserts. "Rather, it is the process of learning a second language that provides a groundwork for becoming bi-cultural and learning how to be sensitive to other cultures" (Park 23-24).

Kevin McAuliffe, Manager of Reuters' Video Products Group in Japan, notes that businesspeople pursuing careers in international settings must "learn to pick up on the nuances of what is taking place in a local market. That's tough to do through an interpreter, because you miss the little things, the raised eyebrow--or the equivalent in that particular culture" (Park 24).

As the graduates of American business schools take on the challenges of competing in a global marketplace, they increasingly encounter foreign-based competition for market share. "Whether or not you are familiar with another culture,"

says Rula Al-Adasani, a senior official with the Kuwait Investment Office in London, "it's downright dangerous to assume the other side doesn't understand yours" (Park 24).

Management professor Mary Ann Von Glinow has suggested that companies can gain a competitive edge by "breaking down existing paradigms and selecting the most appropriate business practices regardless of their national origin" (Park 24).

Is this sort of writing and thinking a passing fad in international business circles, or will the managers of the 21st century find themselves confronted with "culture" as a principal business consideration in a worldwide marketplace? A recent issue of Fortune notes that the U.S. business community has made serious pleas for business schools to produce graduates with a global perspective. The article cites General Mills as just one of many companies wanting its future MBA hires to bring international negotiating skills to the job (Deutschman 67-78).

General Mills isn't alone. Y.A. Cho, the Chief Operating Officer of Korean Airlines, recently said "In dealing with American businesspeople, I'm amazed at how naive most are about other cultures and the way that others do business." Cho adds, "In no means am I about to eliminate U.S. firms from the list of business giants, but there is a tendency by Americans to expect that everyone else should learn English and that learning about cultures is of limited importance. Those expectations," he says, "are hurting the United States' ability to compete globally" (Knop 28).

If all of this is true, and a number of important, credible sources tell us it is, whose responsibility is it to prepare managers for a global marketplace? And equally important, how do we go about it?

Many businesses have taken on the responsibility for themselves. "There is a reason why Baxter is called International," says Kent Delucenay, Vice President of Human Resources for Baxter International's Renal Division, which currently has two international assignees working in Japan and a general manager moving to Europe. "Nearly two-thirds of our division's sales are generated outside the United States. We have to think about developing global careers. We need people who can think and work in different cultures, and we need a thoughtful plan to develop global managers" (Finerman 26).

Baxter's International Assignment Administration, headed by David Dresden, has prepared hundreds of health-care industry executives and technicians for life in other cultures, making them and their families more comfortable and productive overseas and the company more competitive. Baxter currently has more than 50 expatriates working in various nations around the globe (Finerman 26).

According to Holger Ammon, a human resources and labor law specialist with Bayer A.G., the international pharmaceutical and chemical giant, "Bayer is no longer a German company with international markets. We are now an international company with headquarters in Germany." Ammon went on to note that the

company's mission statement had been revised recently to reflect that change. "We cannot afford to think of ourselves just as Germans any longer. The majority of our business is done outside of Germany and we must become international managers if we're to succeed" (Ammon).

Corporate giants, of course, can take on some of the responsibility of preparing their managers to live, compete, and succeed in other cultures. Many firms seeking to do business overseas, and even within cultural subgroups in North America, however, don't have the resources--including money and expertise--to engage in language and cultural training for their employees. Some have turned to consultants with very specific needs in mind; others have sought help from commercial software and trade books dealing with international and intercultural communication.

The more astute among this nation's businesspeople have begun looking more closely at the educational preparation of those applying for work with their firms. Do they speak a second language? Have they had an opportunity to live, work, or attend school in another country? Do their transcripts reflect any graduate-level coursework in cross-cultural or inter-cultural communication? How well prepared are they to take on the responsibilities and challenges of a global marketplace before they report for work?

ESTABLISHING AN MBA-LEVEL COURSE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Preparing an entry-level manager to understand and appreciate the nuances of life in other cultures will clearly require more than just one course in intercultural communication. The recent trend toward "globalization" in various graduate schools of business reveals that a complete re-thinking of curriculum, course content, and educational aims may be necessary to bring about the desired results. In addition to language training, internships, overseas study, and revamped case and text content, though, a course in intercultural communication may well prove useful.

Determining Course Goals

A course in intercultural communication should differ from basic or introductory-level communication courses in several important ways. First, students should already have taken a basic course to acquire an appreciation for the communication process, audience analysis, feedback cycles, barriers, and the skills required of both senders and receivers. They should have some practice at devising written and spoken messages for various business settings, solving business problems, preparing reports, conducting meetings, interviewing employees, handling negotiations, and dealing with the public and the press.

A course in intercultural communication should assume much, if not all of those things, and move beyond the basics to ask how culture and the differences in cultural habit and makeup will

affect interactions between groups of people hoping to do business with one another.

In general, a course in intercultural communication should aim to give students an appreciation for the importance not only of cultural differences, but of cultural preferences in communication style. Preferred communication style--both in sending and receiving, as well as processing our intentions--is, perhaps, the single greatest source of difficulty people from differing cultures will experience as they seek to interact with one another.

The course should also help students to understand the ways in which the principles and axioms of human communication apply across and within cultures. It should assist students in understanding how verbal and non-verbal codes, the dimensions and constraints of human communication systems, and how cultural orientations and beliefs will affect our abilities to communicate.

Students also need a full appreciation of the complex issues associated with power, gender, language, and tradition in human social and commercial interaction. And finally, they will need some understanding of the ethical dimensions of communicating within and among other cultures.

Selecting Textbooks and Readings

There are few areas of business education that are as important, yet as new as intercultural communication. There are none that have fewer textbooks available for review. The current

range of texts is neither broad nor particularly deep, with mainly theoretical reviews of behavioral and anthropological research at one extreme and handbooks of language, currency, trade law and travel tips at the other.

Authors such as George Borden (Cultural Orientation) provide a theoretical approach to understanding intercultural communication which few of the students will fully appreciate. Those with undergraduate communication diplomas will understand the prose in a text such as this, but many others will hunger for a more practical approach.

William Gudykunst, whose name has been synonymous with leading-edge research and publication in intercultural communication for 15 years, has collaborated with Young Yun Kim to produce the second edition of a text that has grown increasingly popular among students of communication (Communicating with Strangers). Gudykunst and Kim's work is predicated on the early writings of German sociologist Georg Simmel, noting that each of us is a stranger as we approach the members of another culture. Gaining acceptance, or at least tolerance by members of another culture, is the goal of communication from their point of view and that goal drives much of Gudykunst and Kim's writing. Their work is sound throughout, but has little if anything to do with business practices around the world.

Managing Cultural Differences by Philip Harris and Robert Moran is now in its third edition and has grown in popularity,

especially as a reference or supplementary text in international and corporate communication courses. Philip Harris directs his own consulting firm in LaJolla, California, and Robert Moran is a faculty member in the American Graduate School of International Management, better known perhaps as the "Thunderbird School," in Glendale, Arizona.

Their work centers on managers and the various roles they play as cosmopolitans, communicators, negotiators, creators of cultural collaboration, leaders in cultural change, influences of organizational culture, and as influences of work and team cultures. The Harris and Moran text contains a wealth of practical data, including discussions on how to manage for cross-cultural effectiveness, how to prepare for transitions and foreign deployments, managing business protocol and technology transfer, and how to handle cross-cultural training. The final seven chapters of the book describe the process of doing business with everyone from Europeans to Asians to Middle Easterners, with heavy emphasis on language, cultural characteristics, protocol, and non-verbal mannerisms. For those planning to live and work overseas, a book such as this might well prove indispensable.

A recent arrival on the book market by Professor David A. Victor of Eastern Michigan University may help bridge the gap between theory and practice for students of business. International Business Communication (1992) is organized around issues in international business communication, including language, environment and technology, social organization,

contexting and face-saving, authority conception, nonverbal communication, and temporal conception. Victor's thorough review of the existing literature in this area is combined with a pragmatic manager's approach to using the research findings in everyday business circumstances.

Regardless of which text you may choose for your students, the bulk of the intercultural communication message will likely be carried by classroom discussion, guest speakers, supplemental readings, and student-led activities. The text will be useful in providing a baseline experience for all who have enrolled, but no instructor can hope for more than that from a text--at least not for now.

Selecting Guest Speakers

Who you invite to speak in your classroom is a function of several things: your intellectual biases, your taste in presentation styles, vicissitudes of the calendar, and--of course--the availability and willingness of people who know something about this subject.

Virtually every college campus has an anthropology department, or less frequently, a sociology department with cultural anthropologists in residence. It's a good idea to ask an anthropologist to spend a class period with your students explaining what culture is, how cultures are formed, what functions they serve, and how they adapt to various human needs. Anthropologists, in general, tend to be good story-tellers and are likely to be well received by your students. Examples,

anecdotes, illustrations, and historical allusions are all useful in explaining not only the roles and functions of cultures, but why they differ from one another.

Many college campuses will also provide access to a number of people specializing in such things as gender and ethnic studies. While it's essential that you exhibit considerable caution in selecting someone to speak on those subjects, it's certainly worthwhile to include them in the syllabus. The problem with many scholars in these somewhat politically sensitive areas is that they will teach the content material as a political cause, and not as an intellectual discipline. Knowing why men and women tend to adopt differing communication styles, understanding more about ethnic cultural experiences in the communication process, and appreciating the range of differences from one society to another, and within each society, can be enormously rewarding for your students.

Unless your campus is situated in a very remote setting, odds are good that at least a few of the businesses and industries nearby can provide some insight into how they handle trade and manufacturing contacts overseas. One or more of them may well provide a representative who can address the process of preparing for an overseas assignment, or how they welcome foreign businesspeople to this country. If you cannot find a business firm in your immediate area that will provide a speaker on the subject, try your alumni association. Your alumni director should be able to provide the names, addresses, phone numbers,

and business associations of a number of graduates who are employed by--or who may own--businesses, organizations, or associations that are involved in commerce overseas. An alumnus or alumna will often leap at the opportunity to return to his or her alma mater to address the students on a subject he or she knows well. It's splendid publicity for the firm, as well, and the company may well agree to cover the costs involved.

One additional area you may wish to include in the syllabus is that of "diversity training." Appreciating differences between cultures shouldn't exclude the possibility of appreciating those within cultures, especially our own. A guest speaker from virtually any Fortune 500 firm can explain how that organization has moved to handle issues related to gender, age, ethnic background, national origin, sexual preference, and other differences in workforce makeup. If you can't find a representative of a large firm willing to speak to a class, contact a local bank, insurance, or financial services firm. Most will have both plans and programs in place to deal with cultural diversity in the workplace and are happy to talk about them.

Selecting Films and Videotapes

Audio-visual support can be a useful, though expensive, means of achieving your learning objectives. Appendix A lists a number of important new films that will address many of the objectives your students are likely to regard as important. These films are, for the most part, geared to the needs of large

businesses and industrial concerns. Few of them are directed specifically at students. For that reason, among others, you should never plan to show a videotape or film without first previewing it and outlining both contents and their relationship to your learning objectives.

Among the more interesting alternatives is a program entitled "Decision Exercises: Managing Difficult Situations." This 28-minute videotape from the VideoLearning Resource Group is a collection of 11 brief vignettes in which one or more cross-cultural communication failures causes trouble. These scenarios range from a frustrated employee who recently missed a promotion --and confronts his supervisor about it in the company parking lot--to an accusation of sexual harassment that senior management must resolve without destroying the lives and careers of those involved.

The tape is structured in 2-to-3 minute segments, capably acted out by professionals who appear plausibly caught up in real-life workplace dilemmas. Following each segment, you'll have an opportunity to stop the tape, ask what happened, how it might be resolved, and equally important, how it might have been avoided to begin with. In addition to highlighting important cultural differences having to do with ethnicity, gender, age, disabilities, and more, this sort of approach to classroom discussion often produces important discussion and innovative thinking on issues related to organizational behavior, organizational development, human resources management, and

general management theory. A tape of this sort has multiple uses and can serve as the springboard for any number of learning activities, including position papers, role-playing, classroom discussion, and group analytical projects.

Involving Students in the Learning Process

Among the greater dangers in a course of this sort is the temptation on the part of both student and teacher to leave the bulk of the work to the instructor. Frankly, this subject matter doesn't lend itself to passive learning, straight lecture format, or readings measured by objective examination. The course goals clearly call for students to be involved in the learning process from the very beginning.

Films, videotapes, and audio-visual materials of the sort just discussed can certainly bring students into confrontation with their assumptions about the workplace and the people they'll find there. It may also bring them into conflict with one another. You should never plan to introduce a commercially-produced videotape or film without first identifying--preferably on paper--what you want your students to learn, what the issues to be confronted will be, and how you and they plan to resolve the problems presented.

Newspaper and magazine clippings can have the same heuristic effect, though the early phases of print-based discussions never seem to produce the same level of emotion as tape or film. Articles regarding ethnic-based marketing practices, weighted hiring criteria, or the value of international assignments in a

professional career plan may provide just the stimulus your class needs to open a healthy, wide-ranging discussion.

Another equally useful technique may be to involve students in group presentations on issues related to intercultural communication. In teams of 2, 3, or 4, students can identify one reasonably narrow issue, research the available literature, and present their findings to their classmates. Some topic selections, such as "The Importance of Chronemics in Latin American Business Dealings," or "The Difference Between a Bribe and a Gift in Middle Eastern Cultures" may lend themselves to oral presentations supported by overhead transparencies and classroom handouts. Others, such as "Gender Differences in Nonverbal Communication Behavior," or "Business Etiquette in Japan" may well involve demonstrations, role-playing, and much more active presentations to the class. Requiring that students share equally in the research, preparation, presentation and grade for the project is usually wise, though certain exceptions are inevitably necessary for students who contribute less (or more) to the group's effort.

Evaluating Student Achievement

From a student's point of view, one of the joys of a course such as this is the virtually certain knowledge that no multiple-choice, true-false, or other objective examination will confront the learner at mid-term or at the end of the semester. Why? Well, primarily because no widely agreed-upon corpus of knowledge exists to be mastered before going on to advanced forms of study;

no nationally-accepted set of principles exists for memorization and recital, as is true of mathematics, engineering, the sciences, and certain of the humanities and social sciences.

Much of the learning that occurs in a business-related intercultural communication course is predicated on principles derived from sociology, anthropology, philosophy (including the study of ethics), and behavioral psychology. Students are quick to point out that many of the questions presented in class "have no single right answer." True enough, though it is equally true that many of the students will suggest answers which are demonstrably wrong or false.

Measuring student achievement of the learning objectives is difficult, though far from impossible. Business communication is a subject area that involves writing and speaking and it seems reasonable that any coursework bearing that general title might require that students write and speak in exchange for a grade. The quality of their organization, expression and support are readily, if subjectively, measurable. Of decidedly greater importance is the quality of their thinking.

For that reason, it may be useful to present your students with a mini-case, business scenario, or work problem to react to in writing. Often, a range of problems to choose from will heighten their sense of fairness in the evaluation process. A problem involving the Middle East, accompanied by another dealing with Latin America, and still others focused on East Africa or the Pacific Rim will provide each student with an opportunity to

select, react, and demonstrate mastery of at least some of the course material.

Mini-cases involving ethical issues are particularly useful in intercultural communication because what is considered perfectly acceptable in one culture may well be taboo or forbidden in another. The conflict of legal, social, personal, and cultural norms (including the norms of organizational culture) are fertile ground for revealing what students have learned about other cultures, their own cultures, and themselves as members of an increasingly intercultural and highly-interdependent world.

The Value of Studying Intercultural Communication

Some faculty members and, surprisingly, many students will express skepticism at formalizing the study of a subject which few will consider to be an established discipline. Two responses come to mind. First, a quick glance through the Wall Street Journal, Business Week, Fortune, Forbes, or the "Business Day" section of The New York Times will reveal the extent of public awareness on the issues to be studied in an intercultural communication course. The content of the course is far less abstract and removed from day-to-day life than many would imagine. American business leaders have spent literally millions of dollars training their employees on intercultural issues in recent years; preparing them for overseas travel and assignment; seeking contracts, contacts, commerce and profit offshore.

If corporate managers and CEOs have created a highly-profitable industrial substructure of trainers, lecturers and experts in cross-cultural issues, could it be that the business schools, colleges and universities who supply the entry-level workforce for those businesses simply aren't doing their jobs in preparing those young managers? A number of important studies, including those by Decision Research Corporation in 1990 and Munter in 1989, have shown that employers and graduates alike increasingly value communication-based preparation for the workplace and so-called "soft skill training" in both undergraduate and MBA degree programs. Technical and quantitative skills are essential, they say, but the possession of such skills without the understanding and ability to communicate with customers, clients, regulators, employees, and others in the cultural crucible of the marketplace may well be a blueprint for competitive paralysis.

The real value of the course lies in better preparing our students to face the realities of the world they'll enter after graduation. The more proximate value comes in providing something that employers and students alike are demanding in our curricula. Those students, after all, are our customers and, as graduates, are our product. A customer-oriented, quality-based approach to the learning process holds the potential to benefit all who are involved.

APPENDIX A
SELECTED FILMS AND VIDEOTAPES

"Communicating Across Cultures,"
10V-3082 (30 min.)
Copeland Griggs Productions, Inc.
302 - 23rd Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94121
Phone: (415) 668-4200
Fax: (415) 668-6004
Distributed by:
VideoLearning Resource Group
Phone: (215) 896-6600

This video shows how misunderstandings result from different styles of communication. It also addresses the discomfort people feel when dealing with issues of race and gender, and suggests ways to communicate more effectively. Various vignettes with only a small bit of analysis. Voice-over narration instead of black-background interviews.

"Decision Exercises: Dealing with Difficult Situations"
8187 (25 Min.) - Released 1990
AMES Media
9710 Desoto Avenue
Chatsworth, CA 91311
Toll-Free Phone: 1-800-367-2467

A collection of 11 brief vignettes in which one or more cross-cultural communication failures causes trouble. Each segment is 2-to-3 minutes in length, presenting various situations in the workplace that should provoke considerable classroom discussion. No "ideal" solutions are offered, only stimulus for student reaction.

"Managing Diversity,"
1/2" VHS-111269-8 (22 min.)
CRM Films
2233 Faraday Avenue
Carlsbad, CA 92008
Phone: (619) 431-9800
Toll-Free: 1-800-421-0833

Various scenarios in a computer manufacturing firm highlight the differences inherent in race and cultural background and how those affect individual motivation and team productivity. Interviews with experts are interspersed with segments related to workplace issues.

"Multicultural Workplace,"
6272MVHS (32 min.)
MTI Film & Video
A Simon & Schuster Company
420 Academy Drive
Northbrook, IL 60062

This video deals with separate communication-style vignettes, followed by analysis from various supervisors, administrators and other experts. Cultural differences and how they affect communication style is the main focus; organizational effectiveness is dependent on communication success.

"Perception,"
CRM Films
2233 Faraday Avenue
Carlsbad, CA 92008
Phone: (619) 431-9800
Toll-Free: 1-800-421-0833

This video illustrates some basic concepts associated with human perception, including such things as closure, constancy of form, figure-ground relationship, information overload, myopia, problem redefinition, projection, selective perception, stereotyping, stimulus correction, and tunnel vision. Some animation, as well as live action. Somewhat dated, but useful in illustrating how perception works and how it may differ depending on background, preparation, and familiarity with subject matter.

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